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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the personal and educational experiences of a Kenyan woman now living in the United States. The paper relates her misfortune of failing the primary school national examination, which meant that she would not be admitted to a government high school. It discusses education during the British colonial period in Kenya and traces her passage through a Catholic boarding school with 300 students from all walks of life. The paper describes the woman's life in the United States where she attended graduate school. The education system in Kenya is described, giving the historical background of the traditional Kenyan system, and noting the beginning of modern western education in Kenya. It also considers the education of females in Kenya. After Kenyan independence, education was seen as a vehicle to train more human resources to enhance economic development; distribute national income; bring national unity; and ameliorate national disparities. The paper states that Kenya defines the objectives of education as follows. Education must:(1) serve to foster national unity; (2) serve the needs of national development; (3) foster, develop, and communicate the rich and varied cultures of Kenya; (4) prepare and equip the youth of Kenya with expertise to play an effective role in the life of the nation; (5) promote social justice and morality by instilling right attitudes; and (6) foster positive attitudes towards other nations. It concludes by discussing primary (elementary) education in Kenya. (BT)

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The quest for education in Post Colonial Kenya: My personal experiences

ED 479 092

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Girls were wealth. Daughters brought home bride wealth which the sons used to marry the daughters of other clans. They extended the kingship networks. Their children were allies. Therefore she should grow roots, for if she were to remain the only link between the two clans, on her death, this link would be severed" (Kabwagyere, 1975).

The Dream

I am sitting up on my bed in the middle of the night after a nightmare that I had failed the Primary school national examination. This would mean that I might not go to a government high school or I might end up going to a Harambee school (schools built by parents to accommodate those who do not pass the National examinations with high grades). My going to a Harambee school would most likely mean that I would not be able to pass the next national examination given after four years of high school. These schools do not have as much resources as the public schools though the government provides teachers. I have three more months before I take the examination but my anxiety level is going up and everyone in my class seems to be having the same anxiety. There is a great deal to study and memorize. I have to pass in Mathematics, English and General subjects which consist of geography, history / civics and science. If I pass I will join a high school and if I do not then I will have to dropout of school unless they allow me to repeat the class again. My teacher says that if we pass very well we may even join one of the national schools, which are the best in the country, otherwise with above average score we will go to one of the provincial schools. For the last six months the nuns have been revising past exam questions with us. They have given us many questions from past examinations in the hope that some of these may appear in our examination this year. Though many of the questions do not make sense, we are memorizing the answers. It seems to me

that the nuns have stopped following the syllabus and they are just drilling us for the exam. The nuns do not encourage us to ask why things happen. They just tell us to know the answers. For example I would like to know why we use certain formulas in mathematics but the teacher does not entertain such stupid questions. Anyway I hate the subject, as I do not see the reasoning behind what we do in class. Why doesn't the nun answer our "why" questions. Could it be that she doesn't know the answer? I have always wondered about that. But again these nuns are supposed to know everything. But I guess it is not important to know why things happen or why they are that way. This must not be a part of education. To be educated one just needs to be able to recall what the nuns said.

Colonial Identity

With the British control in Kenya all Kenyans felt the need to identify with what was considered to be western or British and to sacrifice a lot of cultural and traditional beliefs that our forefathers had taught the younger generations. People even changed names to take on British names because the British could not pronounce the African names. When you change your name you lose your identity of who you really are. What is in a name? One may ask, but a name means more than a name to answer to. Your name makes you who you are, it is your identity and it is really you. When one is forced to take on a foreign name it steals ones own identity and forces you to start thinking you are someone you are not. Using two different names, your real name at home and your English name in school or at work was causing a lot of confusion to the young and old alike. So do I have to remember that I am Njeri for some hours and Mary for the rest of my day? Do I need to think a two different people for the different names?

Traditionally, women were brought up to value the roles of wife, mother, and cultivator. Children

were also seen as additional farm labor to help the women. Women were responsible for all household and child-related tasks. In the last seventy years, traditional societies have undergone considerable change, and a shift in the division of labor between the sexes has created a feeling of insecurity among women. As more men take jobs away from home, many women are left with more responsibilities at home.

In the 18th Century formal schools were established in Kenya by the Church Missionary Society at Rabai near Mombasa in the Coast Province. This was the start of formal "western" education in Kenya. The schools were built to promote Christian evangelism, but later developed into instruments to produce skilled labor for the white settlers' farms and clerks for the colonial administration. Education in the colonial era was racially stratified. There were separate schools for Whites, Asians, Arabs, and for Africans. Up to independence in 1963 there was great disparity in education level between males and females but also between the different races. Females did not participate in the education system as the men were being trained to work for the colonial government and this agreed with the indigenous culture of the people where women were seen as housewives or mothers (Bogonko, 1992).

Though traditionally women were seen as house wives and mothers colonialism brought a stress on the marriages as the "white master" took the men to work in the farms or the few educated to work in the offices as custodial workers or office clerks. This so franchised the families that women realized that they had to be providers for the family when the men were away in the city or the farm. The belief that education would change ones livelihood brought such a keen hunger for education that after independence every parent wanted their child to go to school. The Kenya government had to build more schools and boarding schools mushroomed in every location in the

country.

It was in this trend of things that I was taken to an elementary level boarding school in the rural area. Catholic nuns from Italy were in charge of the boarding school. My parents thought that this was a great achievement for the family. The school had 300 girls from all walks of life. Being so young and displaced from home every student had to find herself and her own identity. The conditions in the school were horrible to say the least. The food and sleeping quarters were horrible but the quest for education made us more determined to endure all the hardships, with the pride of knowing that this education would eventually change our lives. Being in a boarding school at such an early age changes your whole perspective of life and especially family life. Thrown into the military kind of discipline where we were required to wake up at 5 am to be ready for church at 6am changed us a lot in terms of discipline and character forming. Had we become robots of the system or did we allow ourselves to grow into who we were, I always wondered? The intensive discipline and schooling never allowed us to discover who we really are. The nuns disciplined us with a heavy hand to become what they perceived as good African girls. Indeed when I look back at all the classmates that I have met over the years we met the expectations of the nuns as we have all gone on to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, and whatever else they told us to be, but did we really find ourselves or we went along with what the nuns thought we should be as they pushed and forced us to be. Being educated was important to fit into the colonial mold so what choice did we have?

Being in the classroom with one of the nuns as your teacher meant that you never asked any question even when you had one and never ever talked in classroom for those forty minutes even if you needed to ask your neighbor for a pencil or eraser. Free time was never heard of in my school

as we were either in the church or studying or the time. The nuns believed that idleness was the devil's workshop and they never allowed us idle time to make sure that we get into no mischief.

Finding myself in the traditional society

Being away from home for three months in the boarding school and coming home for the holidays made me feel an outsider to the other world called "home village". Trying to fit in with the other village girls was difficult for me as these girls thought I had changed. The village girls knew me, as Njeri and they never liked to use my English name. How could I fit into two lives? Who was I? Did I belong to the village or with the nuns? At some point I thought I had a call to be a nun as many of the other girls in my school did. But was this a call or was it because we did not have any other role models to identify with? Some of my schoolmates joined the convent but they did not last long as they soon realized that this was not their calling. Staying away for three months meant that the other girls my age had developed skills and games that I still had to learn, and by the time I was competent it was time to go back to school. Making friends was also difficult for me because I really did not know my village girls very well. How I missed to be at home throughout the year and to play all those games in the evenings and weekends. The traditional beliefs dictated that girls were to learn certain things to prepare them for the future as mothers and wives. Being in a boarding school I missed all the traditional education given to other girls by their aunts and grandmothers. I had become the child of two worlds, but I achieved and went on to high school and the to the university for further studies.

Finding myself in a foreign country

Many years have passed since my boarding school experience, but the same anxiety of feeling

displaced surfaced when I came to the United States for further studies. Again I felt like a child of two worlds. The cultural shock of being in a foreign country was unbearable. How was I to maintain my identity in a country where even my "queen's tongue English" was being questioned? How was I supposed to survive in a society where the life and education system was so fast? The cultural differences were enormous and the gap between my Kenyan British upbringing and the American life style was great. I had been taught to say, "How do you do!" when one is introduced to you but here they say, "what is up?" When they meet you. I learned very quickly how to use the slang as a friend gave me a book on American slang.

As a student I had to work two jobs to pay my tuition and take care of my family, since my husband was also a student at the same institution. This was my worst experience coming from a regular job in Kenya and never having to work as a university student. The government paid for tuition for all university students as an incentive to encourage students to go on for higher education. Later this system was changed to giving students a loan to be paid only after they finish their studies and work for at least a year.

As a foreign student I could not apply for federal loans or many other grants available for graduate students. On top of all this I had to pay double the tuition fees as an International students. Eventually I was able to acquire a job as a graduate assistant until the end of my graduate education and my did this help!

Being a student, mother and working almost full time was difficult but the quest again for higher education superseded my problems and I was more than ever determined to finish my studies to the highest level possible. This I did achieve, but had I passed all the tests and was I going to live happily ever after?

Finding myself in the profession

At last I had achieved the highest degree and this meant I could fit into any society as I had a lot to offer I thought. As an educated international female I have come to realize that just like I had to work hard to be accepted by the nuns as belonging to their circle, I still have to work hard to be accepted in academia. Having an accent means every person I interact with knows I do not belong and some people will close you out on that basis. Some will decide that I have nothing to offer because of my strange accent or worse still they decide that they do not understand me because of my accent.

Though I have grown and know who I am despite what others feel or think my heart goes out to all those in our schools, migrant children who have been closed out of the circle because some teacher feels that they do not belong to the inner circle and will not amount to anything. Worse still these children are sometimes closed our by their peers and they have no one to turn to. Who will help them find their spot in this world?

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KENYA

Introduction

Traditional education in Africa dates back to the formation of African societies, and was largely informal learning that did not take place in a classroom. Incidental learning occurred by imitation in and out of the home and also through lullabies or popular songs. Training in specific skills was also acquired through apprenticeship, as when a girl learned homecraft from her mother or from female relatives and when an adolescent male learned the art of warfare from the

experienced warriors of the group. The whole community was involved in the education of the individual.

Traditionally, women were brought up to value the roles of wife, mother, and cultivator. Children were also seen as additional farm labor to help the women. Women were responsible for all household and child-related tasks. In the last seventy years, traditional societies have undergone considerable change, and a shift in the division of labor between the sexes has created a feeling of insecurity among women. As more men take jobs away from home, many women are left with more responsibilities at home.

In 1846 the Church Missionary Society established a school at Rabai near Mombasa in the Coast Province. This was the start of formal "western" education in Kenya. The school was built to promote Christian evangelism, but later developed into an instrument to produce skilled labor for the white settlers' farms and clerks for the colonial administration. Education in the colonial era was racially stratified. There were separate schools for Whites, Asians, Arabs, and for Africans. Up to independence in 1963 there was great disparity in education level between males and females but also between the different races. Females did not participate in the education system as the men were being trained to work for the colonial government and this agreed with the indigenous culture of the people where women were seen as housewives or mothers (Bogonko, 1992).

Consequently, girls in Kenya as in other Sub-Saharan African countries have had different educational experiences than have the boys. Staudt (1984) has studied colonial schools for girls in African countries and found that they were concerned with preparation of food and other household activities. Rogers (1980) says in his report that it was the boys who were singled out for formal education in colonized countries, while the missionaries taught the females domestic skills.

A national survey of attitudes and school achievement among students in Botswana found strong support for the notions that women should be primarily responsible for domestic work (Duncan 1989). In addition, she found that a gender ideology that defined various subjects as male or female was a significant factor in determining achievement. She also found a consistent negative association between femininity and achievement, which implies that many girls are forced to choose between competence and femininity. Kagia (1985), found that the choice of curricula according to perceptions of female fields of study in Kenya limits the range of opportunities for employment. In addition, Kagia (1985) concluded that lower performance levels for girls than boys in Kenya were due mainly to poorer quality of many girls' schools. The sharp distinction between male and female socialization in most African Moslem countries according to El-Sanabary (1989), has a negative effect on girls' self-esteem and aspirations that is reinforced by their experiences at school. Tinker and Bramsen (1975), writing of students who attend Moslem schools in Nigeria noted that these girls do not ask questions neither do the teachers ask them.

Currently, one area of concern is women's access to education. On the whole, the disparity between the sexes in education is partly historical and partly economical. Men had a head start in education during the colonial years, and the lead is still continuing. Until recently, rural parents have been unwilling to invest in their daughters' education, because they consider such an investment wasteful (Davidson, 1993). Moreover, given the nature of Kenyan society, once a parent has been paid the bride wealth, he relinquishes all rights to his daughter, and her future earnings benefit her husband's family. For rural families, sending daughters to school implies a greater cost in terms of foregone contribution to the farm and home (Davidson and Kapakasa 1992).

Following the attainment of political independence in 1963, the Kenyan government embarked on a massive expansion of the educational system to make education accessible to all people who could not get it during the colonial era. The Kenyan curriculum was changed to reflect Kenyan cultural values after 1963 but it still centers around passing national examinations.

Long before the coming of Western education there were traditional African and Islamic education systems practiced in Kenya. The education was on actual life, experiences, moral values and skills necessary for life. Education was viewed as a life long experience. The African indigenous education conserved and transmitted knowlegde and wisdom from one generation to another.

Western education was introduced in Kenya in mid 19th century by Christian missionaries. For the African people school disrupted the balanced indigenous economy without giving quick returns. The first schools that the missionaries opened were prayer houses meant to teach Christianity. School was therefore used as a means of evangelism. The missionaries concentrated on industrial education in agriculture and technical training. Academic learning was never the agenda of the missionaries (Bogonko, 1992).

The mission schools did not offer education beyond the third or fourth year of elementary education. These mission schools were called "village schools". The white settlers needed "educated" labor in the form of masons, carpenters and other trades and therefore did not encourage literary learning. By 1920 education was well established in Kenya. (Eisemon, 1988) After independence, the Government tried to restructure the education system so a to relate it to national needs and aspirations. Education was seen as a vehicle to:

- train more human resources to enhance economic development;

- to distribute national income;
- to bring national unity;
- and amelioration of national disparities.

In trying to achieve the above ends the government of Kenya defines the objectives of education as follows:

- Education must serve to foster national unity.
- Education must serve the needs of national development.
- Education must foster, develop and communicate the rich and varied cultures of Kenya.
- Education must prepare and equip the youth of Kenya with the knowledge, skills and expertise necessary to enable them, to collectively play an effective role in the life of the nation whilst ensuring opportunities are provided for the full development of individual talents and personality.
- Education must promote social justice and morality by instilling the right attitudes necessary for training in social obligations and responsibilities.
- Education must foster positive attitudes and consciousness towards other nations (Ministry of education, 1994).

Primary Education in Kenya

Primary education is the first level of formal education provided in Kenya. The curriculum lasts eight years and caters for those wishing to go to secondary schools and vocational training schools. Pupils start primary school at the age of six (6) years. The respective local authority in accordance with section seven of the Education Act Cap 211 manages all public primary schools maintained by a local authority. The objectives of primary education in Kenya are as follows:

- To impart literacy, numeric and manipulative skills.
- To develop self-expression, self-discipline, self-reliance and full utilization of senses.
- To develop ability for clear logical thought and critical judgement.

- To acquire a suitable basic foundation for further education, training and the world of work.
- To develop awareness and understanding of the immediate environment and foster positive attitudes towards other countries and towards the international community.
- To develop a strong whole person, including the physical, mental and spiritual capacities.
- To develop desirable social standards and attitudes.

One important aim of primary education, is to provide literacy, numeracy and manipulative skills. A Presidential working party (the Mackay Report, 1981) appointed in 1981 recommended that numeracy and literacy be emphasized for the first six years, and that the last two years of primary education have a practical bias, providing children with skills necessary to modernize rural life. Industrial arts and practical subjects are stressed in the primary school curriculum. Primary education aims at preparing people to play their full role in developing the country and also to regenerate African culture and enable school pupils to appreciate their own culture without discarding knowlegde of other cultures. In this respect syllabuses were localized to include African culture. Furthermore, primary education is supposed to develop not only a measure of logical thought and critical judgement, but also self-fulfillment, physical, mental and spiritual capacities.

From 1963 to 1983 primary education was seven years but in 1984 the government moved to implement the Working Party's recommendation that the primary education be switched to an eight-year primary education. They also recommended a four year secondary and a four-year university (which is currently referred as 8-4-4 education system) education system. The new system would give more importance to Kiswahili and practical subjects to prepare pupils for self-employment.

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